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ABSTRACT

The value of language learning theory and research is discussed, and the need for content-related linguistic, sociolinguistic and cultural research, as well as treatment-related research on language teaching and learning, is emphasized. It has been only gradually, from about the mid-sixties and increasingly from the early seventies, that second language learning has begun to be consistently researched. This research has been prompted by the psycholinguistic interest in language acquisition, the linguistic interest in the characteristics of learner languages, and the "applied" interest in the improvement of second language teaching and learning. Current research efforts are cited. As an orientation for research, and as an aid for teachers and learners, a model of the language learner and language learning is offered. Six main categories are identified in the model: context, learner, teaching input, opportunities to use the second language in the environment, the learning process, and the learning outcome. (SW)

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# Second-Language Learning Research and the Teaching of Languages in the University

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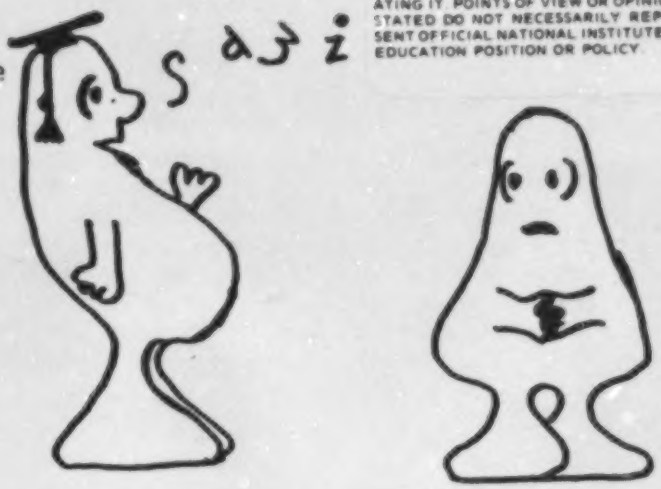


I welcome the opportunity that is offered by this meeting to talk about second-language learning and teaching in a university setting. I believe it is far-sighted and timely on the part of the organizers of this meeting to give us the chance to talk to one another about this subject.

Many university departments in one way or another are concerned with language questions: departments of languages and literatures (for example, French and German), classics, linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and psychology. However, the research and scholarly interests in most of these departments are usually directed to matters other than language learning and teaching; for example, in language and literature departments, to questions of literary criticism, or the history of literature.

The teaching and learning of languages is frequently treated, in language departments, as a practical task which is necessary, but of no academic merit or interest; a chore on which an academic teacher should spend as little time as possible and which is best left in the hands of junior assistants. I am not suggesting that language teaching and learning research should replace the

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more accepted scholarly interests of language departments. However, this area deserves much more attention than it has received up to now.

The result of this absence of interest is that universities, instead of providing leadership in thought and practice on language teaching and learning, make a relatively limited contribution to its advancement. Yet, they are in a key position to exercise a powerful influence. I would go so far as to suggest that any substantial improvement in language pedagogy, which most of us look for, ultimately to no small extent depends on the language-learning experiences at the university level.

Language-teaching practice at the university level will do well only if it is supported by theory and research. If it is not, the language training part of university language programs is likely to become a second-rate routine operation, inferior to language teaching elsewhere in the educational system where it is increasingly backed up by such research, and inferior also to the other activities of a university which again, without question, are regarded as subjects for theory development and research.

What kind of research is needed that has bearing on the teaching and learning of languages? There are two main areas: (1) research related to *what* is taught and learnt and (2) research on *how* it is taught and learnt.

(1) The *what* type of research provides the data of contemporary language and culture needed for second-language curriculum development; that is, descriptive linguistic and socio-linguistic research on French, English, and other languages, as well as corresponding descriptive socio-cultural research. Such studies could provide much activity of interest to departments of linguistics, languages, sociology and anthropology. The conversion of the findings of such research into curriculum materials is the task of applied linguists and language teachers.

(2) The second type of research is that which is related to the *how* of teaching and learning. In these brief remarks, I want to focus on one aspect of the latter, namely second-language *learning* research.

Before doing so, I would like to re-emphasize, however, that I regard both areas of investigations as equally necessary: content-related linguistic, sociolinguistic and cultural research, as well as treatment-related research on language teaching and learning.

## The Value of Language Learning Theory and Research

The idea of a language-learning "theory" or research on language learning may have a strange ring for some faculty members who are accustomed to the scholarship in their own discipline. They are likely to recognize the need for literacy theory and research or linguistic theory and research, but to question the value of introducing "theory" and "research" into such essentially practical activities.

It is, of course, perfectly true that all of us as language learners or teachers have a practical wisdom and knowledge which do not wait for someone to come along to develop a theory, do research and then apply these to what has been happening, apparently without them, for a long time. In any educational activity - language teaching is one of them - the development of theory, research and practice is best viewed as one of constant interaction. It is the practice which presents questions, problems, and puzzles. The theory is simply the systematic attempt to think about these practical problems, and research the attempt to resolve them by methods of systematic investigation and sometimes by methods of scientific inquiry.

Second-language learning suffers from obvious practical difficulties. In so many instances, it is unsuccessful. It stands in such vivid contrast to the almost inevitable success of first-language acquisition. We recognize the need for improvement at all levels of language learning. Language teachers have, of course, thought about this for a long time. The teaching method controversies that have been going on for centuries reflect the puzzle and the attempts to solve it.

## The Study of Learning and the Learner

An interest in understanding the learner and learning as such is not new either. Language teaching at any level, from school to university, implies a theory of learning and the learner. But one of the weaknesses of the study of language learning in the past had been the paucity of any direct investigations. A definite research tradition in the area of language pedagogy altogether is of relatively recent origin, approximately 15 to 20 years.

With few exceptions, the most important studies in the sixties tried to come to grips with the question of methods of teaching: is the new audiolingual method really so much more effective than the traditional grammar-translation method? Is the

language laboratory an essential teaching aid? Research found very equivocal answers to these questions, and there was debate about methods of teaching and their theoretical justification.

Apart from Carroll's work on language aptitude and aptitude testing in the fifties and Lambert and Gardner's on attitudes and motivation in the sixties, the interpretation of language learning, ten or fifteeen years ago, was much more the result of speculation and extrapolation from general psychology than from empirical research. Hence, controversy raged whether learning is more the outcome of habituation and training or more of thinking and study, and whether it is like or unlike first-language acquisition. Very little was done to verify how language learning actually proceeds.

In spite of theorizing and very sharp controversies about the nature of second-language learning, it is only gradually, from about the mid-sixties, and increasingly since the early seventies, that research has begun consistently to look at second-language learning as a fruitful area for investigation.

Such research has been prompted by a number of considerations. First of all, several psychologists and psycholinguists, who had previously studied first-language acquisition, became interested in making comparisons with bilingual-language acquisition and second-language learning as a means of understanding better the language acquisition process in general.

It has always been a puzzle to me why the psychology of learning had so consistently neglected to study the highly interesting and problematical processes of second-language learning and the failure to learn languages.

A second interest has been linguistic. Linguists today recognize that the type of language produced by a second-language learner deserves to be studied as an interesting linguistic phenomenon in its own right, which can be legitimately related to such other linguistic phenomena as pidginization and creolization. In the tradition of Saussure, the Prague School, Bloomfield, and Chomsky, modern linguistics until recently had looked at languages largely as closed systems, and it was somehow unable to cope with language contact.

A few linguists, however, such as Weinreich, Haugen, and others, ignored these boundaries and studied language contact, the language of immigrants, and bilingualism; others, for example, Fries, Lado and di Pietro, developed contrastive linguistics, and others again were prepared to look at the linguistic products of second-language learners as distinct language systems in their own

right, referred to as the "learner's language," "interlanguage," or "approximative system" (Valdman, 1975).

The third impulse was more strictly applied. It derived from the sense of frustration among many language-teaching theorists at the continuing inefficacy of much language teaching, in spite of changes in methods, materials, and classroom organization. Many argued, as J.B. Carroll had already done in 1953, that our understanding of second-language learning was inadequate; and without a better understanding of learner characteristics and learning processes, the battle among methodologists would continue, and the extravagant claims of the advocates of new methods would persist in mudding the waters.

Second-language research, then, has been prompted by this threefold interest: the psycholinguistic interest in *language acquisition*, the linguistic interest in the characteristics of *learner languages*, and the applied interest in the *improvement of second-language teaching and learning*. In the last few years, considerable strides have been made. A brief glance at a number of recent works (for example, Jakobovits, 1970; Oller and Richards, 1973; Brown, 1976) and issues of such periodical publications as ACTFL Annual Review, Language Learning, TESOL Quarterly, and Working Papers on Bilingualism will quickly confirm that there are many examples of this growing interest in the language learner and learning.

Some of the research was stimulated by Pit Corder's writings on error analysis from 1967. Another influential stimulus has been the concept of "interlanguage," that is the construction of the L2 that the learner develops for himself, proposed by Selinker (1972). A great deal of interest and controversy was aroused by Dulay and Burt who vigorously defended the thesis that second-language learning goes through similar developmental phases to first-language acquisition. The principal centres for research have been in America at Harvard, the University of Michigan, and the University of California at Los Angeles. The sociolinguist Joan Rubin, around 1971, proposed empirical investigations on classroom learning.

In Canada, the centres most directly interested in these questions are the Departments of Psychology at McGill and the University of Western Ontario, and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education Modern Language Centre. For example, the centre at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education has studied, and continues to study, second-language learning in classroom settings.

One major project, funded by the Secretary of State, was an empirical investigation in 1974-75 on good language learners

and their learning strategies (Naiman *et al*, 1977). It consisted mainly of two studies: an adult interview study in which some 30 outstandingly successful adult language learners who had command of one or more foreign languages were asked to retrospect and introspect about their language learning. In the main study of this project, we made detailed classroom observations on 72 good and poor students of French in Grades VIII, X and XII in Ontario schools. They were also tested and interviewed. The main focus was personality characteristics and learning strategies of good as well as of poor language learners. These investigations continue. Thanks to a further grant by the Department of the Secretary of State, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education is now engaged in studies of language teaching as well as learning.

By about 1974 or 1975, a sufficient number of investigations had been carried out in different centres that several researchers felt the need for some form of review and integration of the diverse approaches that had been made to this research in recent years. A meeting held in February 1974 at the invitation of the University of Michigan offered a first concerted attempt at a synthesis, later published in a symposium of the journal Language Learning (Brown, 1976). On this occasion, Schumann (1976) took a global look at the learner and placed recent work, its findings as well as its deficiencies, into a comprehensive model. Several other similar models have been developed in order to define and describe the concepts and relationships that at the present time make up our understanding of the nature of second-language learning, for example, by Gardner (1976), and Yorio (1976). Figure 1 is my own interpretation of recent thought on the learner and learning, based on these studies. A week or two ago, at a conference on language-learning research, my colleague Merrill Swain presented a further refinement and conceptual clarification of these different models which will no doubt be published in due course (Swain, 1977).

These syntheses of the current "state of the art" show a general consensus of interpretations. While there is agreement about broad concepts and categories, the details are by no means understood yet, and the relative importance of different factors is only beginning to be investigated. Again there is a broad consensus about the gaps in our knowledge.

## The Model

Turning to the diagram, we recognize the advantage of a research approach. The categories and factors identified are not world-shattering in their novelty. The model does not tell us anything

**Model of the Language Learner and Language Learning (Figure 1)**

that we could not have come up with on the basis of practical experience and reflection. Yet, it provides a more wide-ranging set of factors and a more systematic arrangement. Most of us may have been aware of this or that factor. For example, some have claimed that language-learning success is all "a matter of motivation," or others blame their lack of proficiency on "complete lack of talent for languages." For years now, there has been a still unresolved argument about the best age for learning language. Is there an optimal age? If so, what is it? Some people are quite prepared to give us a definite answer to this question. But we simply have not yet any clear understanding of age-specific differences in second-language learning.

Such models, then, provide a map and an orientation for research. But they also serve a teacher who wants to understand the factors that might explain his students' success or failure; they can be used as an *aide-mémoire* as to which aspects to bear in mind. They might even give students - certainly adult students at university level - some concepts for interpreting their own language learning.

The diagram identifies six main categories labelled:

(1) context
(2) learner
(3) L2 teaching
(4) L2 environment
(5) learning
(6) learning outcome

What investigators are interested in is to find out (a) what factors are to be identified within each category, (b) how these factors relate to each other across categories, and, eventually (c) how they relate to the language proficiency reached.

You will notice that, in these interpretations, the focus is on the learner and learning alone. Teaching appears simply as one category, entering as "input" into the learner-learning paradigm. This does not indicate a lack of regard for teaching. There should be a corresponding analysis of teaching. Educational theorists familiar with Dunkin and Biddle's Study of Teaching (1974) will know roughly what it would look like. But this model analyzes mainly the learning side.

If we apply the diagram particularly to the learner in a university setting, how can we interpret it?

Context (1)

The student in a language class finds himself inevitably in a certain political, cultural, and sociolinguistic milieu that offers him certain value judgments, attitudes, expectations, and aspirations - most obvious in English-speaking Canada with regard to French. The student is not exposed by his milieu to only one particular "party line" on language, but to an array of judgments represented by his home, his fellow students, the university itself and the world at large. In any case, these environmental factors form an essential background to language learning which have not yet been much investigated.

The Learner (Box 2)

Turning to Box 2, the implication is that different students present a variety of different characteristics. Research has been particularly interested in the relative importance of particular learner traits. Carroll(1975), for example, has repeatedly expressed the belief that language aptitude is very important, without committing himself as to whether this aptitude is innate or acquired. Against this, Gardner's and Lambert's work(1972) and that of Gardner's students and colleagues in the Psychology Department at the University of Western Ontario express the claim that attitudes and the motivational orientation to the language community are at least as important (Gardner, 1975).

The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education research team (Naiman *et al*) has tried to identify certain enduring characteristics of personality and cognitive style which may enter into the way a student approaches the language-learning task: for example, "field independence," that is, the ability to tease out the important clues from unimportant ones(a tune from a noise, an embedded shape from a confusing drawing, or in a new language the message from the confusion of strange sounds). Other personality characteristics that may help a learner are the capacity to empathize, that is to put oneself in the shoes of those who speak the target language; to be tolerant of ambiguous situations; or to be an outgoing, risk-taking individual: As a language learner, you are well away if you don't mind making a fool of yourself. All these findings on personality and cognitive style are still extremely tentative, more so even than those on aptitude and attitude.

It is likely that certain characteristics are more important at different stages of language learning. For example, aptitude as measured by the Modern Language Aptitude Test is probably more predictive of the early stages of language learning than of success at more advanced levels.

At university level language learning, the student's previous language-learning experiences, I am sure, play an important role in determining how he copes with his language learning at the university.

I am convinced it would be a mistake to use any analysis of these learner factors as means of selecting students. Rather, they should be regarded as having potentially diagnostic value in our attempts to understand and allow for the assets and defects students bring to language learning. Our "Good Language Learner" interviews suggest that people with very different personalities can eventually make a success of language learning (Fröhlich, 1976). The main point to be made is that these learner characteristics influence the way in which the learner copes with the input he receives, and, eventually, the learning outcome. But these relationships must not be viewed as a one-way street. The learning experience and the success or failure at the outcome end of the diagram feed back to the learner and change him: his self-image as a language learner.

Teaching and L2 Opportunities (Boxes 3 and 4)

The process of learning a foreign language is stimulated by two "inputs," first by the *teaching* the students receive in courses, through lab practice and assignments, indicated by Box 3 at the top; the second input comes informally from *opportunities* to use the L2 in the environment, indicated by Box 4 at the bottom - in the case of French, for example, reading French on the cereal packet, listening to the radio, visiting France or Quebec, making contacts with Francophones in the community, reading literature of interest, seeing films or plays.

It is our conviction, on the basis of our studies in the Modern Language Centre to date, that the combination of *formal* (instructional) *input* with opportunities for *functional use* in natural, informal, communicative situations provides the best chance for successful learning. The immersion programs that have become popular illustrate this combination. The research on various options recently carried out in Ottawa public schools points in this direction (Stern *et al*, 1976).

The Learning Process (Box 5)

The learning process itself can be looked upon as consisting, overtly, of strategies and techniques employed by the learner, and, covertly, of conscious and unconscious mental processes going on inside the learner. The *strategies* are general approaches used by a learner, while *techniques* are more or less consciously employed specific forms of learning behaviour, for example, how to take vocabulary notes. We set out from lists of strategies based originally

on fairly detailed inventories developed by Joan Rubin(1975) and myself(1975). On the basis of our most recent studies, we came up with a somewhat more reduced list of minimum essential strategies:

(1) The learner must be active.
(2) The learner must come to grips with the language as a system.
(3) The learner must practise.
(4) The learner must use the language in real communication.
(5) The learner must monitor his interlanguage.
(6) The learner must come to terms with the affective demands of language learning.

Lists of this kind are tentative. Nevertheless, the various attempts that have been made by us and others to establish inventories of learning strategies and techniques can be useful to university teachers and students.

At the university level of language study, it seems imperative for a student to introspect about his own learning so that he does not only learn the language more effectively, but that he learns how to learn a second language.

Within the learner, there must be certain mental processes going on which enable him, more or less, to master the new language and, conversely, which may prevent him from learning it satisfactorily. The "input" is not absorbed inevitably. The "intake" of new language items, to use Corder's phrase, operates selectively and leads to acts of perceiving, inferencing, analyzing, classifying, relating, storing, and retrieving; and, eventually, to constructing a language output and monitoring of this language output.

We must also attempt to account for the unconscious learning that goes on when the language is used in real-life situations. To our knowledge, such a psycholinguistic analysis of second-language learning has only just begun. Krashen(1976) has made a useful conceptual distinction between learning by study and acquisition (similar to first-language learning), both of which can occur in formal and natural environments. Our "Good Language Learner" research and the present "Language Teaching and Learning Project" represent attempts to study and understand some of these aspects of the learning processes (for example, Bialystok and Fröhlich, 1977).

Learning Outcome (Box 6)

If one ultimate objective of research and theory in this area is the improvement of language teaching, the touchstone must be the learning outcome. The problems, which everyone interested

in these questions faces, are, as we have noted, the frequent learning failure and widespread learning inadequacy even after years of study. Good, successful language learning is not the rule. Moreover, the lack of success is accompanied by learner dissatisfaction, the awareness among learners of their own inadequacy, sometimes feelings of frustration, anger, and disappointment.

In university language programs, such feelings are perhaps not as widespread as among learners in other settings. But if they do occur in a university, and I am sure that they are not completely unknown here either, they have influence on student enrolments. Lack of competence in the language seriously affects further studies (foreign language literature or study of sources). The general repercussions of failure or inadequacy at this level are considerable.

Language-learning research has been particularly interested in the learner's output, his errors and his interlanguage, and has made serious attempts to understand the development of the learner's proficiency, his error patterns, his ineradicable fossilizations and backslidings. It has tried, although not yet very successfully, to infer the learning processes that underlie particular interlanguage phenomena. For example, in the past, it was customary to attribute errors entirely to interference from the mother tongue. However, it is now believed that the language-learning process follows its own developmental patterns.

We should again remind ourselves of the reciprocal effect of learning outcome upon the learner. Learning success and failure are likely to colour the learner's attitudes to the language and the people who speak it. These attitudes contribute to the way society views language learning as well as the language and people in question and, thus, affect the social context.

The output of the learning process in the university setting are certain products which guide us to make judgments about the learner's progress and mastery level: Is he able to read the literature required, to write an essay, or to use journal articles as sources? Can he participate in a discussion or follow a lecture in the second language? It is up to the university department to determine what students should be able to do at the end of particular language programs; to organize the program in such a way that the majority of students can reach these objectives, and, if they cannot, to take steps to investigate why, and to experiment with remedies and alternatives.

One aspect in such a review - this is the main contention of this paper - should be to look critically at the language *learning* that goes on in the program in question as well as at the difficulties

and failures that occur. The kind of research I have referred to can provide hints and clues to a better understanding of the learner and his problems.

In conclusion, I hope that through these remarks I have indicated that a theoretical and research orientation to second-language teaching and learning has practical merit and that, at the same time, it can make a contribution to the academic quality of language programs in the university.

One final comment should be made: I have tried to show that university language teaching might derive benefit from learning research of this kind. However, what I would regard as even more important is that university language departments can contribute to these studies. One of the difficulties of research on language learning with children as subjects is that children do not only change with regard to their second language, but, at the same time, mature physically, intellectually, and socially; hence, it is often difficult to disentangle language learning from general development. But, as Merrill Swain (1977) has recently rightly pointed out, in the adult learner, "linguistic development is unlikely to be confounded with cognitive development."

Moreover, university students as language learners can actively cooperate in research on learning. In other words, the university is an ideal field for such studies. We may, therefore, expect that university language departments in conjunction with departments of psychology, linguistics or education will increasingly contribute to this research from which eventually all of us should benefit who are concerned about the "Language Connection."

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